

COAL MINING IN FAIRBURY, ILLINOIS

by

Dale C. Maley

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Shaft Hill

Note that no coal mine is shown east of the current grain elevator between 9th and 10th streets on the north side of the railroad tracks. There is still a small slag pile, covered with vegetation, at this location. In the mid 1960's, the author went sledding down this hill, and at that time it was called "Shaft Hill". Below is a 2016 photo of this slag pile:



In 2018, the author updated this book, which was originally published in 2016. While checking research materials, the author realized the "Shaft Hill" coal mine was described in the 1909 Volume 2 history book.

The first coal mine was sunk in the fall of 1861 by Henry L. Marsh at a cost of \$35,000. Previous to August 22 of that year the second attempt to sink a coal shaft on this farm proved a failure on account of too much water. On the above date ground was broken the third time. After many difficulties, coal was reached January 14, 1863, measuring four feet ten inches. At that date it was the only coal shaft in central Illinois.

In 1867 the shaft was sunk still deeper to a lower vein. The mine was leased to John Watson in 1877 and he continued to operate until March 16, 1881, when the shaft was abandoned.

The sinking of the second mine east of the village was commenced in April, 1867, coal being found at a depth of 160 feet. This was owned by a stock company of which Amsbary and Jones were at the head. James Gibb was superintendent The mine was sold April 6, 1881, to Porter, Wager and Company, for \$6,000. This mine has also been abandoned.

In March, 1878, James Gibb, Robert Knight, Michael Hotchkiss and John Kirkwood, purchased at trustee's sale for \$1,000 six acres of the Marsh land, just west of the village,

and also purchased the right to the coal under seventy acres in the same vicinity. At a depth of 176 feet they reached a vein four and a half feet thick at a cost of nearly \$10,000. This mine was sold on June 12, 1881, to Walton Brothers for \$10,000. They operated the mine for twenty-two years, when they sold it to a stock company. The mine was abandoned in 1906. Two mines, both run on the co-operative plan, are now in operation—one located one-half mile south of the city, the other one mile west of the city.

So, what is today referred to as "Shaft Hill" was actually the East Shaft coal mine. It was opened in April of 1867, and was closed by 1909. It's maximum years of operation was 42 years based upon these dates.

1867 Article on East Shaft Mine Being Started

The April 2, 1881, Independent Blade, carried a reprint of a July 4, 1867, story from the Fairbury Journal newspaper. It tells the story of a new coal mine being sunk in 1867.

From the local column, there is but one in this paper, we see that T.A. Jones is getting along finely with the "east shaft", the depth of 120 foot having been obtained.

East Shaft Mine Sold in 1881

The April 9, 1881, Blade carried the following story.

Sale of the East Coal Shaft

Negotiations for the sale of the east coal shaft have been pending some weeks, and within the last few days the sale has been nearing consummation. Now we are enabled to announce that Messrs. H. T. Porter and E. E. Wager, of Chicago, and Wm. Perry, of Indiana, have contracted to purchase the mine. There are a few details yet to dispose of before the trade is an absolute certainty, but it is confidently expected all obstacles to the sale will be removed in a day or two.

Should the mine change ownership, a largely increased force of men will be employed, and the business will be pushed vigorously. The price to be paid for the mine is about \$6,000.

The sales price of \$6,000 in 1881 dollars would be equivalent to \$154,707 in 2017 dollars.

Tile Factory Moved from East Shaft in 1883

Fairbury was initially swamp land. The tiling of the fields converted them from unwanted swamp land to some of the most productive farm land on the planet. Demand for clay field tile was so high, that the Straight family set up a huge tile factory on their farm. It takes a huge amount of heat to dry out the clay and form the hard hollow field tiles. At some point, the Straights must have moved their tile factory to the East Coal Shaft mine. They could take coal straight from the coal mine, and use it to heat and make their field tile.

The November 10, 1883, Fairbury Blade reported the Straights were moving their tile factory away from the East Shaft coal mine.

R.C. Straight has moved the tile factory from the east shaft in this city to El Paso, and this week began making tile at the latter place.

Losing this customer may have been one of the contributors for the East Shaft coal mine to close sometime before 1909.

East Shaft Coal Mine Sold Again in 1885

The May 14, 1885, Blade reported the following story.

Walton Bros. have succeeded to the proprietorship of the east shaft and now control both mines.

Closing Date of East Shaft Coal Mine

No Blade article could be found at this time that reported the closing date of this mine. We know it was closed by 1909 because it was reported in the 1909 Volume 2 history book as being closed.